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ABSTRACT

The Center for Educational Innovation (CEI), established by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research in 1989, views school choice as the best strategy available to improve public schools on a large scale. CEI's approach to school choice involves giving school professionals the freedom to design innovative and distinctive school programs and giving parents the right to choose, in pursuit of these innovations, the public schools that they want for their children. In this critique of the report by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, "School Choice: A Special Report" (October 1992), CEI diverges from the report's conclusions on three issues. First, CEI defines school choice as parental choice plus the freedom to innovate, a broader definition than is contained in Carnegie. Secondly, in CEI's view, the report holds public school choice to an unrealistic standard, a standard which amounts to making this component solely responsible for the failure or success of educational reform. Finally, in contrast to the Carnegie Report, CEI acknowledges the effectiveness of inner-city parochial schools, which have been found to produce much higher results than neighborhood public schools with the same type of students; CEI sees these schools as a viable alternative school choice. Both the Carnegie Report and this response to it cite school choice programs in several localities. (IAH)

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PUTTING THE CARNEGIE REPORT ON SCHOOL CHOICE IN PERSPECTIVE

Prepared by Raymond Domanico
November 16, 1992

Introduction

On Monday, October 26, the Carnegie Foundation released a draft report entitled "School Choice" which raised some serious questions about the efficacy and importance of school choice. Coming from such a well-known institution and released during a presidential election in which all major candidates had embraced school choice of one form or another, the Report was bound to attract widespread attention. It did. *The New York Times* ran a front-page story under the headline, "Research Questions the Effectiveness of Most School-Choice Programs," that day and a follow-up story and editorial on Tuesday. Al Shanker's advertisement gave the report more prominence on Sunday.

Though it might be easy to dismiss as electoral politics a report which was rushed into print one week before the election, the Carnegie Report nevertheless is a serious effort to understand and evaluate the effectiveness of school choice initiatives. What does the Report say and what are its implications for the work of the Center for Educational Innovation? A number of their findings actually mirror some conclusions that we drew as we launched the CEI three years ago and seem to ratify many aspects of our work.

However, we have some strong differences of opinion with Carnegie over the policy implications of their findings, and we also believe that they ignored some important evidence on school choice. Because the differences we have with Carnegie begin with some basic definitions, it will be useful to review our approach to school choice before launching into a discussion of the Report itself.

CEI Definition of Public School Choice

In 1989, as we established the Center for Educational Innovation, we spent a fair amount of time reflecting on the experiences of Sy Fliegel and his colleagues in East Harlem, as well as reviewing the available evidence on the few school districts that had functioning school choice policies at that time. We also

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reviewed and gave great credence to the available research on the success of inner-city parochial schools. Combing these strands of information, we crafted a definition of public school choice which has served as the guiding principle of our work to this day:

> *Affording school professionals the freedom to design innovative and distinctive school programs; and giving parents the right to choose, in pursuit of those innovations, the public school that their child will attend.*

In those early days, we also surveyed the field to try to find examples of that type of school choice in action, with the admitted hope of finding more evidence that we were on the right track of school improvement. We found that, although many people were talking about school choice, only a sparse number of districts had actually implemented the full range of reforms that we associated with the term. We had already published a review of the East Harlem experience; we followed up with a monograph on the Cambridge school choice policy; and we also distributed a summary of another organization's evaluation of the Montclair, New Jersey program of choice. At the time, we concluded that there were no other existing school choice programs which could serve as viable models for other school districts to follow. The concept of public school choice was still a very new one.

Thus, we initiated a process whereby we would create more examples of public school choice in action. Through our efforts, six additional school districts in New York City and three in New Jersey have either adopted public school choice or are in the process of doing so. Recently, the Chancellor of the New York City Board of Education announced his intention to make interdistrict choice available to all students in elementary, middle and junior high schools.

The Center for Educational Innovation is an operating unit of the Manhattan Institute, a non-profit research and educational organization which seeks to promote sound public policy The CEI operates on several levels: it sponsors original research and writing on various educational topics; it hosts conferences and seminars for educators, governments officials and others interested in improving America's education system; and it works directly with individual school administrators in the development of alternative educational programs. The Center is a leading force in the movement for school choice, and its professional staff includes several former administrators of New York's East Harlem School District Four.

Raymond J. Domanico is the Director of the Center for Educational Innovation. From 1984 to 1988 he served as administrator of data analysis at the new York City Board of Education. He is the author of "The Right to Choose: Public School Choice and the Future of American Education"(CEI monograph, 1989), "Restructuring New York City's Public Schools: The Case for Choice"(CEI monograph, 1990), "A Model Public School Choice Plan for New York City Public School Districts"(CEI monograph, 1991), and "Putting Schools First: Changing the Board of Ed's Priorities" (co-authored with Colman Genn), City Journal, *Spring, 1992, pp. 47-56.*

What Does the Carnegie Report Have to Say ?

The Carnegie Report[1] has a lot less to say about the types of efforts in which the CEI has been involved than it does about the ("inside the beltway") political debate which reduces all serious efforts to mere slogans. The Carnegie researchers combined information from their own review of East Harlem, Cambridge, Montclair, the new Milwaukee voucher initiative and various statewide choice programs and added the results of some original public opinion polling to reach the following conclusions:

> *...our review of the choice 'landscape' leads us to conclude that this strategy alone will not result in widespread improvement. Choice, at its best, empowers parents, stimulates teachers to be more creative and, most important, gives students a new sense of attachment to their schools and to learning. On the other hand, the hazards of school choice in impoverished urban districts such as Brockton and Gloucester, Massachusetts, as well as tiny rural ones like Motley, Minnesota, and Exira, Iowa, cannot be ignored. Neither can we forget that, in Milwaukee, the promise of private school choice has outdistanced the performance. ... It's a diversion then, to present choice as a panacea..some grand design that can miraculously sweep away all difficulties that impede schools and restrict learning. Professor Nathan Glazer, in a thoughtful review of the changes in East Harlem, correctly acknowledges that choice was crucial. But there was something deeper. ... [writes Glazer] "the story begins with educational innovations rather than choice, which was entailed only because the innovators had to find students on which to try their ideas. A key characteristic of the innovations was that they came from teachers, not from top administrators."*

So, what does the Carnegie Report recommend? Its main thesis is that, where choice has worked, it has included "something deeper." It notes that, whereas choice was crucial to the improvement in East Harlem, some states, particularly Massachusetts, have adopted poorly designed choice systems and that the very limited Milwaukee voucher initiative has had serious difficulties. It is important to note that these findings do not conflict with the ideas we had expressed as we established the Center for Educational Innovation three years ago. The difference is that the Carnegie researchers have used the Massachusetts and Milwaukee experiences to build a case against choice in any form while we continue to believe that, although problems with implementation will undoubtedly arise, school choice remains the best strategy available to improve large numbers of our nation's public schools. [2]

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[1] *School Choice: A Special Report*, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 5 Ivy Lane, Princeton, NJ, 1992.

[2] *The New York Times*, October 16, 1992, p. 1 (attached).

Change and Choice as Interdependent Variables

How is it that we agree with some of Carnegie's crucial findings, yet we disagree so strongly on the implications of these findings for policymaking? Three issues separate us from Carnegie. The first should be evident by now--we have a broader definition of school choice than does Carnegie. To us,

School Choice = Parental Choice + the Freedom to Innovate

In pursuit of school choice and educational excellence, we have worked in schools to develop meaningful programs before their districts had even adopted choice (the Mohegan School in the South Bronx).[3] In other places, we have worked on the development of choice policies, and innovation has followed.[4] We do not concern ourselves with what comes first; we believe that both parental choice and innovation are crucial, and we work to bring both into play in a community.

A New Standard for Improvement Strategies -- the Search for a Panacea

Secondly, we disagree with Carnegie on the standard to which new initiatives, including choice, should be held. In this regard, it is interesting to note the way in which the debate has shifted over the last three years. When we established the Center for Educational Innovation, the most oft-heard argument against school choice was that it would harm less affluent students. Our papers on East Harlem, Cambridge and Montclair were meant to respond to that criticism. We never argued that these districts had solved all their problems; however, we believed then, and we continue to believe, that their choice programs were associated with major improvements in the lives of students.

The Carnegie Report establishes a new standard for judging these initiatives. Writing on East Harlem, they state:

> *If there is a single lesson from East Harlem, then, it's that choice is anything but a quick, easy path to school improvement. District 4's pioneering choice system has surely contributed to progress. By some measures, student performance has improved. Parents do feel more empowered, and teachers feel they have an opportunity to be far more creative. Overall, we were impressed by the vitality of the district. Still, with all the progress, choice cannot be cited as the silver bullet of reform.*

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[3] See, for example, *Newsweek*, November 2, 1992, p. 80, which reports on the Mohegan School in the South Bronx (attached).

[4] District Three on Manhattan's Upper West Side is an example. (See Nathan Glazer's article, "No Excuses for Failure," *The City Journal*, Fall, 1992, pp. 24-31.)

Turning to Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Report has this to say:

> *In Cambridge, choice proved to be an important catalyst for change. Says Superintendent Mary Lou McGrath: "I think it had a tremendous influence. Everybody started talking about education. Some teachers had to pay a little more attention. Teachers began realizing we have customers." And these customers seem to be pleased."*

Later, the Report states:

> *Again choice has not been an educational cure-all for Cambridge. Still, it's certainly one of several key factors that has helped move the district into the front ranks of America's most reform-minded urban districts.*

Finally, on Montclair, the Report concludes:

> *School choice has not solved all of Montclair's problems. Still from what we've observed, it has helped promote racial integration and brought a sense of energy to the district.*

Our differences with Carnegie are obvious. For us, the important question has always been: What are the necessary preconditions for meaningful school improvement? (Will the educational lives of children improve if opportunities for choice are introduced?) Carnegie poses a different question -- a straw-man in our estimation. That is, will choice, and choice alone, solve all of our educational ills? We have argued that choice is a necessary component of reform; they counter that school choice alone is not sufficient. The problem with Carnegie's approach, as we see it, is that no known strategy would meet their standard. We live in a world without panaceas; yet the Carnegie Report argues that, unless we can demonstrate that choice is a panacea, we should abandon it and move on to other (presumably) proven cure-alls.

Research Support for Choice not Considered by Carnegie

The Report reserves its strongest criticism for public support of private schools through vouchers. It does so in two ways. The first is a review of the experiences of the two-year-old voucher program in Milwaukee. It is accurate in stating that that program has had problems and has yet to show any improvement in student achievement. However, it omits mention of the fact that the Milwaukee program has a very prescriptive design which other experts would argue is contributing to its problems. One obvious weakness is that the program provides very limited funding -- $1,000 per pupil -- to participating schools.

Even more important is the fact the Milwaukee program is restricted to non-sectarian schools. Thus, in citing it, the Carnegie Report completely ignores research conducted by sociologist James Coleman and the Rand Corporation on the effectiveness of inner-city parochial schools.[5] These findings bear great relevance to the school choice debate since parochial schools, which have become the only schools of choice in many inner-city communities and currently serve mainly non-Catholic students, have been found to produce much higher results than neighborhood public schools *with the same type of students*. By excluding the parochial system, the Milwaukee program is operating only in schools whose existence is precarious at best (one of these schools even went out of business in mid-year, greatly disrupting students and parents).

The second critique of the voucher approach is made through a rather thoughtful discussion of the social and cultural role of public education in our nation. By reminding us of the *public* benefits of schooling, the Report makes its strongest contribution to the debate.[6] Unfortunately, the Report fails to own up to some of the severe failings of the current school system, particularly in inner cities, and therefore does not address the fact that the public system, in its current form, traps many students in schools that have been known to be failing for many years, while a choice policy would allow some of those students to find a better chance to succeed.

Conclusion

The Carnegie Report offers no new evidence that would cause us to alter our program. We have proceeded with a clear vision of what we hope to accomplish, and we get tangible evidence of our progress on a daily basis. School choice has been a powerful catalyst for change in communities where it has been fully embraced. We will continue to work to see that schools and districts implement choice the right way and so that students are the prime beneficiaries of the effort.

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[5] Coleman, James S. and Thomas Hoffer, Public and Private High Schools, Basic Books, New York, NY, 1987.

[6] For a discussion of private versus public school choice, see Seymour Fliegel, "Public School Choice Works-- Look at East Harlem," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 1992, p. A15, and *The New York Times*,, August 30, 1992, p. 6 (interview with Seymour Fliegel and Colman Genn attached).